

Running head: Observable traits shape self-knowledge

What can a looking glass reflect? Trait observability predicts what feedback is  
incorporated into self-knowledge

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### Abstract

In two studies looking at the role of explicit and implicit feedback about the self on self-knowledge, we have found evidence that people incorporate others' impressions into their self-knowledge only when feedback references observable social or physical characteristics. This pattern holds for both positive and negative feedback, regardless of whether the feedback is explicitly or implicitly provided. Feedback on less-observable traits, referencing internal states or competency, was not incorporated into self-perception irrespective of its valence.

Keywords: self-perception

What am I? Companion; say.  
And the friend not hesitates  
To assign just place and mates;  
Answers not in word or letter,  
Yet is understood the better;  
Is to his friend a looking glass,  
Reflects his figure that doth pass.

- Ralph Waldo Emerson, *Astraea*, Poems (1847)

If your friends tell you they have fun getting together with you, and you see that they always seem engaged at your dinner parties, you may infer that you are a fun person. Symbolic Interactionists argue that we gain self-knowledge by doing just that; forming a self-image based on how our friends and families see us, as if they were looking glasses upon which our true selves are reflected (Cooley, 1902/1964; Stryker & Statham, 1985). Contrary to this claim, decades of research have made it clear that we are bad at both predicting what others think of us (Kenny, 1994) and at using others' impressions of us to inform self-knowledge (Shrauger & Schoeneman, 1979). In this paper, we do not focus on informational or motivational limitations in our ability to gain self-knowledge (for review, see Wilson & Dunn, 2004); rather, we highlight how the *content* of self-relevant feedback from others may determine what kind of information becomes incorporated into self-knowledge. We argue that our ability to gain self-knowledge from others' feedback about traits depends on the observability of that trait.

Traits (such as being fun or sincere) are one type of attribute that comprises a person's self-concept (McConnell, Rydell & Browne, 2009; Schleicher & McConnell,

2006). However, traits that can be experienced by others, like being fun, and traits that are internally experienced, like being sincere, are phenomenologically distinct. One cannot be charismatic or friendly towards one's self, as these are traits that are dynamically realized when we behave charismatically or in a friendly manner to another person. Conversely, feeling sincerity or ambition is enacted alone, as these are traits that are realized internally. While evidence for these traits can be ascertained, it remains clear that some traits are more visible than others by virtue of the fact that they vary in the existence of cues that suggest their presence (see Funder, 1995).

It is well established that people are sensitive to differences in trait observability. Targets, relative to acquainted peer observers, rate themselves higher on possessing internal traits while peers rate targets higher on possessing observable traits (Funder, 1980; Funder & Drobth 1987). Targets and peers will allocate resources to understanding these respective trait types (Malle & Knobe, 1997) and consider them to be differentially diagnostic about intentions (e.g., Pronin & Krugler, 2007). These differences have largely been accounted for because people have access to different information when judging themselves compared to when judging others. Individuals have direct access to their internal traits and feelings, affording them greater evidence for the existence of these traits (Miller & McFarland, 1987; Kahneman & Tversky, 1973). Similarly, others have direct access to how an individual is observed from the outside, achieving higher inter-rater agreement when judging targets' highly observable traits, relative to moderately or unobservable traits (John & Robins, 1993).

While individuals, themselves, may differ from others in judging the relevance of internal compared to observable traits, inter-rater agreement between self and others is

also higher for observable traits. Comparing employees' self-rating of management competencies to ratings made by their supervisors, Warr (1999) found that agreement was higher for competencies rated as more observable. While a causal link as to why agreement is higher on these traits should not be made, overlap in rating of competencies between employees and supervisors suggests that, for one reason or another, information about employees' observable competencies is shared at a greater rate than that about less observable competencies.

Given the phenomenological difference between traits, we hypothesize that people more readily incorporate feedback about the self when it pertains to observable traits, compared to less-observable traits. A friend's impression of how fun you are may weigh heavily in your judgment of how fun you are because being fun is a trait that is observed and dynamically experienced with other people. On the other hand, a friend's perception of how sincere you are may not weigh in your judgment of your sincerity because this is a trait that cannot easily be observed by other people. In two studies, participants receive both implicit (Study 1) and explicit (Study 2) self-relevant feedback about traits. We predict that participants will adjust their self-reports of their observable traits in the direction of the feedback that they receive but that their self-reports of less-observable traits will be uninfluenced by feedback.

### Study 1: Speed Dating

#### Method

*Participants.* Data was collected from 551 (225 female, mean age 25) Columbia University graduate students. Participants were run in 14 Speed Dating Events from

2002-2004, with groups varying in size from 16 to 44. The response rate to a follow-up online questionnaire (T2) was 91% (51% female).

*Procedure.* A detailed description of the procedure is provided in Fisman, et. al. (2006), so we will summarize the relevant components for the purpose of this paper. Students registered at a website to participate in the Speed Dating events, a popular new dating tool whereby men and women have short dates with multiple partners in a single evening. At the time of registration, participants completed a pre-event survey (T1) where they rated themselves on 5 key personality traits. Based on the results of a pilot study (see Appendix A), two traits can be classified as *observable*, (attractive and fun), and three as *less-observable* (sincere, intelligent and ambitious.) T1 Self-reports of the 5 traits were made on a bipolar scale from 1 (not at all) to 10 (extremely).

Events were held shortly after T1 at a popular restaurant-bar near the Columbia University campus. Upon arrival, two hosts greeted participants and gave them a nametag with an ID number and a covered clipboard containing a scorecard. They were instructed to sit at one of several two-person tables, set up in rows, with men on one side and women on the other side. Participants engaged in their first 4-minute conversation with an opposite-sex partner sitting across from them. Following the conversation, both male and female participants completed a scorecard, circling “yes” or “no” as to whether they would like to date that partner and rated that partner on the 5 key traits on the same scale used at T1. The men then rotated to the next two-person table, bring together a new dyad who again conversed for 4-minutes and filled out a scorecard, continuing until each male participant had been to each female participant’s table. This generated a rating of each male by each female and a rating of each female by each male. Lastly, participants

received a follow-up questionnaire by email the next morning, in which they once again rated themselves on the 5 key attributes (T2).

### Results and Discussion

Were T2 self-perceptions influenced by speed dating partners' impressions? Each of the five traits was analyzed in a separate regression and is summarized in Table 2. Controlling for T1 self-reports, T2 self-reports were influenced by the average rating a target's partners gave him or her on the observable traits: fun,  $\beta = 0.2$ ,  $T(1) = 4.16$ ,  $p < .01$ , and attractive,  $\beta = 0.08$ ,  $T(1) = 2.21$ ,  $p < .03$  but not for the less observable traits: sincere, ambitious, or intelligent. This result suggests that trait observability matters in predicting whether others' perceptions influence self-perception.

One explanation for why trait observability matters is that other's have more similar perceptions of a target's observable traits and more varied perceptions of a target's less observable traits. That is, other people may simply agree about a target's observable traits, presenting more consistent feedback to that target. Consensual feedback is a predictor of what knowledge becomes incorporated into self-perception (for review, see Shrauger & Schoeneman, 1979). Did targets change their self-report on observable traits because they received more consensual feedback on these traits? We scored the variance of targets' ratings by partners for each trait. Taking the mean of these variances by traits, Table 3 shows that there is no clear pattern whereby targets receive more or less consistent feedback on the observable compared to less observable traits.

We can see that people are sensitive to others' perceptions of them in that partners influenced targets' T2 self-perceptions for observable traits but not for less observable

traits. In Study 1, all feedback was implicit; targets never learned what their partners thought of them. In Study 2 we sought to address the same phenomenon by giving people explicit feedback about how others perceived them.

### Study 2: Lab Study

#### Method

*Participants.* 60 Columbia University undergraduates (58% female, mean age 22) participated in this study. Participants received \$14.00 in compensation: \$4.00 for an initial half-hour lab session and \$10.00 for a second half-hour session one week later.

*Procedure.* In session one (T1), participants rated themselves on 25 attributes from 1 (not at all) to 10 (extremely). Next, participants were given three minutes to compose an essay, discussing their experiences at Columbia, which they were then videotaped reading aloud.

Participants returned the following week (T2) and received false feedback from 27 students who had purportedly watched their videos and rated them on several attributes. For each attribute, participants were given the average rating they received (personal feedback) and the purported average ratings of the other participants in the study (average feedback). Observable and less observable traits of interest were manipulated in two conditions.

In the positive observable condition, we manipulated feedback of two observable traits, charismatic and friendly, such that the participants' personal feedback was substantially better than the average feedback, while their personal feedback was substantially worse than average on the less observable traits: intelligent, rational and decisive. These values were reversed in the positive less-observable condition, such that

participants were better than average on less observable traits and worse than average on observable traits. In both conditions, non-manipulated traits had comparable personal feedback and average feedback. After reviewing the feedback, participants rated themselves on the same traits that they had rated during T1. In particular, they rated the five manipulated traits on which they had received better or worse than average feedback: charisma, friendliness, intelligence, rationality, and decisiveness.

### Results and Discussion

In Study 2, we, again, found that people are influenced by others' perceptions of them. Each of the five traits was analyzed in a separate regression, which is summarized in Table 6. Controlling for T1 self-ratings, Figures 1 and 2, respectively, show that condition significantly predicted participants' T2 self-ratings of how charismatic,  $T(1) = 2.74, p < .01$ , and friendly,  $T(1) = 2.23, p < .05$ , they were, with participants in the positive observable condition providing higher self-ratings of these observable traits than participants in the positive less-observable condition. Condition was not a significant predictor of T2 self-ratings of the less observable traits, rational, decisive and intelligent, suggesting that participants did not change their self-reports of less observable traits in the direction of the feedback.

Unlike in Study 1, where we allowed for natural variation in impressions, in Study 2 we directly manipulated the feedback that participants received. Its findings support our observation from Study 1, that speed dating targets' self-ratings of observable traits at T2 were influenced by speed dating partners' impressions.

### General Discussion

Contrary to prior research, showing that people are not good at incorporating feedback into self-knowledge (Shrauger & Schoeneman, 1979), participants in our two studies were able to use feedback about observable traits to inform opinions about the self. With both implicit (Study 1) and explicit (Study 2) feedback, participants shifted their self-reports of observable traits in the direction of feedback; they became more positive when feedback was favorable and more negative when feedback was unfavorable. We did not see a shift in people's self-reports of less-observable traits.

One account of why people are not good at incorporating feedback into self-knowledge has been that people don't have an accurate account of how specific others view them (DePaulo, Kenny, Hoover, Webb & Oliver, 1987; Kenny & DePaulo, 1993). This suggests that the failure to incorporate feedback is not solely due to *resistance* to feedback; it suggests, instead, that individuals are not *privy* to potential feedback. We would like to extend this reasoning to say that the type of feedback to which individuals are privy may vary and that one explanation of this variance is trait observability. Previous work (Warr, 1999) showing greater agreement between self and other ratings on more observable traits, compared to less observable traits, has suggested that people are privy to observable feedback. We have gone on to show that people are more likely to use this feedback to shape self-knowledge.

Trait observability most likely depends on the features of the target, the perceiver and the context in which it is being observed. In our work, feedback was provided by peers who are likely to both be in the best position to observe social traits and to have the opinion on social traits that matters most. Had bosses or professors instead provided the feedback, individuals might have shifted their impressions of traits that relate to

competence, such as ambition or intelligence. A boss or professor, by the nature of his or her role, directly observes the competencies of an employee or student and has the opinion on competency traits that matters most. Looking at professional dimensions, Shore, Shore and Thornton (1992) found that dimensions rated as more observable in professional contexts (such as “being persuasive”) are more strongly related to criterion measures of those traits and peer nominations of employees than less observable dimensions (such as “being original”). While we have gained insight into the context in which people are willing to use feedback to inform their opinions of themselves, it is possible that the mechanism of trait observability is dependent on the standpoint that the perceiver has to view the target. We would like to conclude with the suggestion that observability is not a *property* of a trait but that it is a *product* of an interaction between the target, the observer and the context in which the trait is being observed. Our ability to yield knowledge from this product most likely helps us to develop and subsist, for as William James declared, “I should not be extant now had I not become sensitive to the looks of approval or disapproval on faces among which my life is cast” (1890/1931 pg. 324).

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Table 1. Paired Sample T-Tests Comparing Trait Observability Rating, For Each Trait Pair.

Trait	1.	2.	3.	4.	5.	6.	7.	8.				
1. Attractive	-											
2. Charismatic	-3.93	*	-									
3. Fun	-5.05	*	1.70	†	-							
4. Intelligent	-8.94	*	4.68	*	-4.86	*	-					
5. Ambitious	-9.45	*	5.55	*	-4.07	*	0.37	-				
6. Sincere	-10.88	*	6.89	*	-4.82	*	1.53	1.37	-			
7. Decisive	-9.75	*	-5.80	*	-4.46	*	-1.53	-1.31	0.00			
8. Rational	-9.75	*	6.70	*	-5.88	*	1.93	†	1.56	-0.19	-1.53	-

Note: The values represent T values, higher values indicate greater difference between two traits (degree of freedom = 62)

\* $p < .001$ ; two-tailed. † $p < .1$

Table 2. Predicting T2 self-report of traits by mean rating by partners on that trait, controlling for T1 self report.

Trait	Intercept			T1			Mean Rating by Partners		
	$\beta$	SE		$\beta$	SE		$\beta$	SE	
attractive	1.84	(.21)	***	0.74	(.03)	***	0.08	(.03)	*
fun	2.09	(.24)	***	0.71	(.03)	***	0.20	(.05)	***
sincere	2.45	(.31)	***	0.66	(.04)	***	0.09	(.07)	
ambitious	1.58	(.22)	***	0.78	(.03)	***	0.11	(.07)	
intelligence	1.78	(.31)	***	0.77	(.04)	***	0.03	(.06)	

\*  $p < .05$ ; \*\*\*  $p < .0001$

Table 3. The Average variance among targets, calculated from the variance among ratings that a given target receives from partners.

<b>Trait</b>	<b>Average Variance</b>
Attractive	2.59
Fun	3.07
Sincere	2.71
Ambitious	2.86
Intelligent	2.15

Table 6.

Trait	Intercept			T1		Effect of Condition			
	$\beta$	SE		$\beta$	SE	$\beta$	SE		
Charismatic	5.98	(.14)	***	0.63	(.08)	***	0.4	(.14)	**
Friendly	6.81	(.12)	***	0.54	(.08)	***	0.28	(.12)	*
Intelligent	7.31	(.1)	***	0.64	(.1)	***	-0.06	(.1)	
Decisive	5.47	(.14)	***	0.6	(.08)	***	-0.23	(.16)	
Rational	7.02	(.14)	***	0.35	(.09)	***	0.09	(.15)	

\*  $p < .05$ ; \*\*  $p < .01$ ; \*\*\*  $p < .0001$

Figure 1. Self report following feedback of how fun you are (1, not at all, 10 extremely).

Figure 2. Self-report following feedback of how charismatic you are (1, not at all, 10 extremely).

Figure 1.

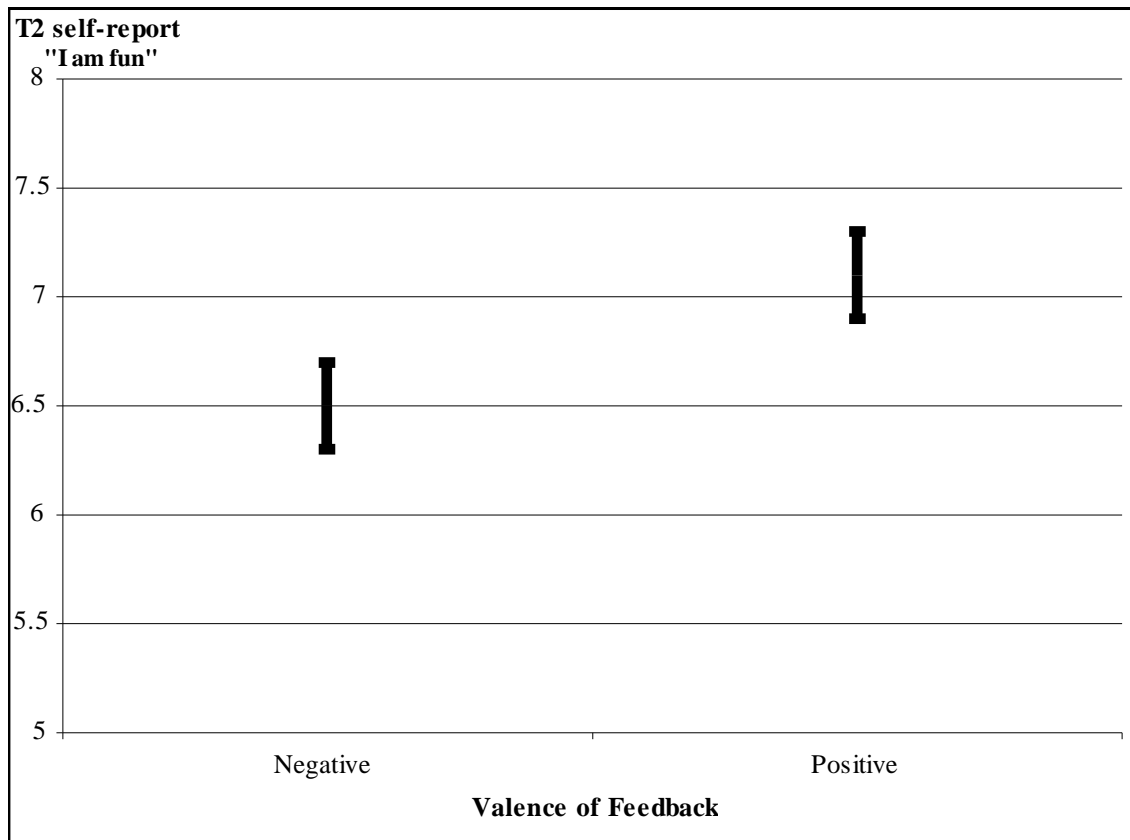
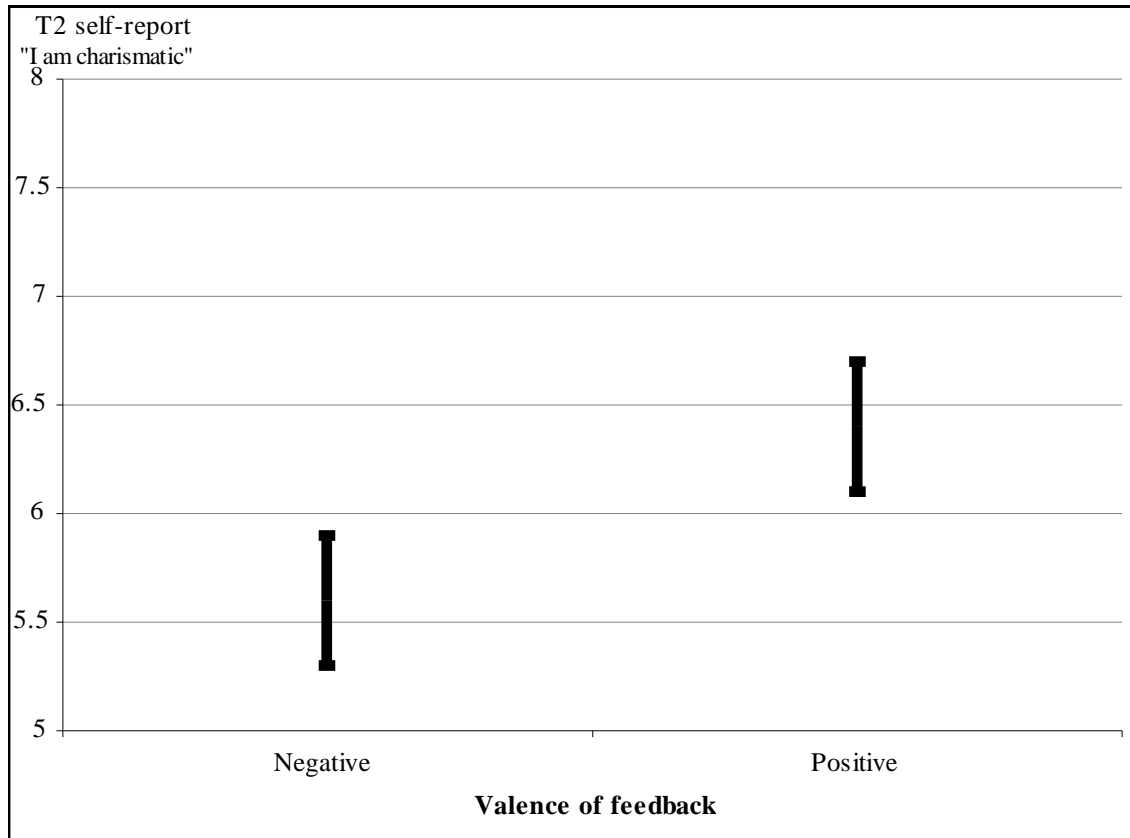


Figure 2.



## Appendix A. Pilot study: Trait Observability

To assess the lay beliefs that people hold about how observable traits are, 62 Columbia University students (age  $M = 22.4$  years  $sd = 3.1$ ) were recruited through an online database to participate in a study on “Impressions” in exchange for \$4.00. Participants rated how observable different personality traits were on a scale of 1 (not at all observable) to 5 (Completely observable). These traits were: fun, attractive, charismatic, sincere, rational, decisive, ambitious, and intelligent.

Paired sample t-tests comparing participants’ ratings of each trait against the others can be found in Table 1. Of our eight traits, attractiveness was rated as being the most observable trait of a person ( $M = 4.50$   $sd = .62$ ), with ratings that are significantly higher than those of any other trait. The traits charismatic ( $M = 3.97$ ,  $sd = .87$ ) and fun ( $M = 3.74$ ,  $sd = .90$ ) were both rated as being significantly higher than the remaining five traits: intelligent, ambitious, sincere, rational and decisive. These five traits received low trait observability ratings that were not significantly different from one another with the exception of intelligent ( $M = 3.21$ ,  $sd = .93$ ) and rational ( $M = 2.95$ ,  $sd = 1.02$ ),  $T(61) = 1.93$ ,  $p < .06$ . We operationalize our observable traits based on the distinctiveness of the three traits: attractive, charismatic and fun, from the other five traits, which we will consider our less observable traits.